

Learning from our stumbles

When my first son was little, I was dismayed when one day as he learned to toddle, he tripped over my foot and fell. “I broke the baby,” I said.

Fortunately, my son was uninjured. And he fell many more times as he learned to walk. Sometimes, falling helped him learn how to keep from falling – and from hurting himself when he did fall. You have to learn to put out your arms to protect yourself when you stumble.

As a church and society, we have all been learning how to deal with the clergy sexual abuse scandal. When the issue first came to general attention in the mid-1980s, some dioceses around the country came up with policies to remove those accused from ministry immediately, report allegations to civil authorities and to offer counseling to victims.

The church, meanwhile, continued to stumble and fall when it came to dealing with sexual abuse within the church.

The U.S. bishops and the church in general learned a little better how to handle the crisis in 2002 when the Boston Globe shined its “Spotlight” on the problem. The church responded with a nationwide zero-tolerance policy for abusers in ministry, with commitments to report all allegations to law enforcement and cooperate with civil authorities, and a pledge to help victims with healing. All clergy, religious, seminarians and lay employees, and all volunteers with significant contact with minors were required to undergo fingerprinting, a background check, and training in ways to identify and prevent sexual abuse of minors.

The Archdiocese of Baltimore published a list in September 2002 of 57 priests and religious credibly accused of abuse over the previous decades, with updates to that list since. And well more than 100,000 people in the archdiocese have undergone background checks and training, certification that must be renewed every five years.

Still, the church stumbled. Not all dioceses have been forthcoming with information. And despite the zero-tolerance policies and the training, there have been incidents. Those accused in the Archdiocese of Baltimore are removed immediately from

ministry. It reports to and cooperates with appropriate law enforcement agencies.

That there are fewer new victims of sexual abuse in the church is no consolation. Every incident includes a victim – a person whose trust was betrayed and whose life was forever changed. As Archbishop William E. Lori has said as he speaks to groups about the crisis, “No policy, procedure or outreach undoes the pain of the victims of sexual abuse. And while no one can undo the past, neither can anyone in the Church ignore the tsunami of sexual abuse that harmed so many innocent victims.”

Hollywood and the political world are learning these lessons as the “#MeToo” movement brings attention to sexual harassment. That others are learning parallel lessons does not excuse the church for its past actions.

Archbishop Lori and our bishops are asking for the input of the laity to come up with concrete suggestions and practical steps to help the church move forward. The archdiocese has set up “virtual town halls” via communications tools used by the archdiocese – FlockNote for email and text messaging, and the MyParish app – which provide options for the laity to respond to questions about the crisis and to comment. The archbishop plans to re-establish a lay Archdiocesan Pastoral Council that will gather this input from the people in the pews.

It’s time now for those of us in the church to funnel our anger and frustration into helping the victims and the church to heal. The church may have stumbled and fallen along the way when it comes to protecting children and vulnerable adults. God willing, we have learned from our falls and our failures.